

Billy Frank Jr: Everyone's Uncle



"Every time we carry an eagle feather, that's sovereignty. Every time we pick berries, that's sovereignty. Every time we dig roots, that's sovereignty," said Nisqually Tribal elder Billy Frank Jr. who passed away earlier this week at the age of 83.

This call for tribal sovereignty made Billy Frank Jr. a legendary figure in Indian Country. He achieved national and international recognition as a towering figure protecting treaty rights, natural resources and the environment. He was a warrior, diplomat, optimist, strategist, father and grandfather. He was and forever will be Nisqually.

Billy was also just Billy to the Nisqually people, our neighbor and friend. Known to all as just "uncle". Billy was humble, unpretentious and never forgot his roots. One day he'd be at the White House dining with world leaders and the next day at the long house for a potlatch with his people.

Billy dedicated his life to protecting our traditional way of life and our salmon. It's been said it was in his DNA, passed on from his father, Willie Frank Sr., who after decades of fighting for treaty fishing rights in 1954 at age 75 put away his nets, claiming his "canoe was getting too tippy and his legs too stiff to stay in."

For more than 60 years, Billy was in the center of action on behalf of the Nisqually people and of Native Americans throughout our country. "We aren't going anywhere," said Billy. And he proved it, time and again.

Billy understood that winning our sovereignty meant playing the long game. He joined his father's cause for tribal sovereignty on the banks of Nisqually River in the fish wars of the 1960s, through the Boldt decision, and countless years leading the NW Indian Fisheries Commission and other efforts. Winner of the Albert Schweitzer Humanitarian Prize, he grew to become a beacon for tribal sovereignty movements around the world.

Billy inspired, pestered and chastised politicians and agencies to be accountable. He fought for what was right, and he persuaded others to do the same through his charisma and force of personality. He also knew when it was time to stop fighting and find common ground. This wisdom led to landmark agreements, major salmon recovery investments and securing of our tribal rights.

But his fight was far greater than tribal sovereignty. He was an advocate for our planet's interests. Billy understood that when salmon and shellfish are plentiful, everyone benefits. Clean water, air and earth are vital for everyone. We all depend on the planet. This was his life lesson.

Whether visiting at Frank's Landing, meeting officials or dedicating a new tribal facility, Billy knew no strangers. His infectious smile and warm hug tempered his passionate spirit with a deep love for humanity. It was this unique blend of drive and heart that both endured our people to him and disarmed his foes. To meet Billy was to hug Billy. This was the uncle we knew and loved.

Billy will be sorely missed and long remembered. His powerful voice and message will be heard for generations to come.

Cynthia Iyall - Chair for Nisqually Indian Tribe